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ABSTRACT

This curriculum guide outlines and discusses communication skills which are important in pursuing a career. The guide, suggested for high school classrooms where the students do not have role models at home upon which to base skill development, lists nine course objectives and briefly sketches instructional units for voice and diction, interviewing, role modeling, student presentations of career theory, hypothetical-business modeling, presentational communication, group problem solving, decoding training, communication and interpersonal communication theory and skills, nonverbal communication, assertiveness training, conflict resolution and negotiations, and career communication values. The guide also discusses the problems which call for decoding training and their remedies. (JM)

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SPEECH COMMUNICATION IN CAREER EDUCATION

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Speech communication training can develop skills which are directly and indirectly related to employment. Skills are directly related to a career when they are central to its performance. Radio broadcasting would be a prime example of a carec with direct communication skills. Indirect skills are those which are important to, but not the essential focus of, a career. Although communication skills are important to a secretary, they are not the essential requisite for the career.

This curriculum guide is aimed at providing indirect skills, those which support a career, but which are not central to it. The guide is specifically suggested for classrooms where the students do not have role models at home upon which to base skill development. Additionally, although not exclusively limited to high schools, that student population is the primary target for the suggestions in this proposal.

Course Objectives:

To achieve clarity through effective expression of ideas and distinct articulation and pronunciation.

To achieve decoding skills by which the individual can more expertly receive the intended message.

To achieve an understanding and appreciation of the requisite career communication skills through role-modeling.

To understand communication principles in a variety of settings; interpersonal, problem-solving, presentational, and organizational.

To be able to diagnose and treat dyadic communication problems.

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To understand and have skills of persuasion.

To appreciate and understand the verbal and nonverbal components of communication.

To develop the values appropriate to adapting communication to a variety of career situations.

To be able to diagnose and treat interpersonal conflict.

Instructional Units: The combination and extensiveness of the treatment of these topics is dependent on the school population needs and the objectives of the instructor. These units are offered as suggestions.

1. Voice and diction: Although this is a very traditional area and one which is not always in favor, some real attention should be given for some students in order to improve their pronunciation and articulation. Major companies, particularly utility companies, can hire many untrained people for receptionists and customer service representatives. To hold such a job, however, students must be able to speak clearly and distinctly. The standard of clarity is defined by the company. Sales representatives, customer service representatives, receptionists, and secretaries represent the company and are most employable when they create a favorable company image.

2. Interviewing: Students should understand how to interview and how to function effectively when interviewed. Role playing is an obvious technique useful for demonstrating the theory and for shaping skills. Most communities provide a variety of willing individuals, such as employment counselors, interviewers for companies, and personnel officers, who will come to class and talk about the essential communication skills for "selling" oneself. Moreover, students should understand and be able to perform a variety of interviews: information sharing, problem-solving, counseling, appraisal, giving orders and

instructions, and employment. Dyadic communication of this type is important to a company.

3. Role modeling: This unit is very directly tied to the types of students being served. The assumption is that certain students do not have among their immediate acquaintances the sort of persons who can role-model the communication skills necessary to function effectively on their job. Other members of the school faculty, such as the business teacher, can be a role model. Certainly, secretaries in the school can be role models. (You might even intern students in such capacities.) You may bring employed individuals to class to role-model and discuss the necessary skills. Lecture-discussion format can help. Also, you should consider class projects where teams of students can go into companies to observe (interning would be excellent) and report back to the rest of the class. The role-models should be carefully selected to set high standards for communication skills.

4. Student presentations of career theory: Have students, perhaps in teams, study first-hand the skills necessary for certain careers. Next, the students should present a mini-lecture to class in which they describe the necessary skills and use role playing to demonstrate the differences between effective and ineffective skills. This comparison should help to establish the criteria for improving communication skills.

5. Company model: Although this is not a business class, you can provide some excellent learning experiences involving techniques of research, problem-solving discussions, and decision-making skills. It may be instructive to create two companies or divisions within a company. Let the students design them after careful research and discussion. Let them decide the structure and purpose and make personnel decisions. The companies or divisions should relate to one another. In the study of companies, organizational

communication is an important topic. The students can use a variety of skills: interviewing, making presentations--persuasive and informative--to representatives of the other company or divisions. If so desired, units three and four can be combined with this one. This unit might even be a capstone for the section of a course whereby the entire array of skills is utilized into the company setting.

6. Presentational communication: The philosophy of this unit is similar to traditional informative and persuasive public speaking. However, it is more pragmatic and goal oriented than traditional public speaking. The objectives are such: to inform about a process so that others can perform it; to persuade as to the advisability of a policy change; to persuade in order to sell an idea or a product; or to describe something so that others understand completely. This type of presentation incorporates traditional skills of clarity, structure, evidence, and audience adaptation. Its primary emphasis is on the objective which grows out of a functioning need of companies.

7. Group problem-solving: This is a discussion unit which deals with traidtional skills and theory of group interaction and decision-making. Students should learn the various functions of groups and the leadership-participation skills supportive of accomplishing those functions. The unit can emphasize how to conduct meetings. You could even have students take notes on the meetings. Secretaries often sit in simply as recorders.

8. Decoding training: Within the context of teaching communication, emphasis is usually placed on encoding-message design-training. Except for brief attention to listening, little attention is given to training decoding skills. Simply stated, these skills relate to the awareness that the encoder may not do an effective job of message design. Consequently, the decoder should be aware of the encoding problems which may cause a breakdown and

should have the skills to cope with the problem. An example would be to doubt that the instructions of the "boss" were well given and then to use a series of questions designed to assume understanding. Employees often perform the job as "required" only to discover that the boss did not give clear instructions and that the employee did the job "wrong." Unless the boss is understanding, the breakdown is the "decoder's fault." Specific recommendations are made below regarding decoding training.

9. Communication and interpersonal communication theory and skills: This unit is designed to identify the basic communication variables and to deal with skills in broad terms. This unit probably should provide supporting theory for other units.

10. Non-verbal: We cannot not communicate is a universal axiom which has direct application to career communication skills. Even if we communicate clearly with others, how well do our non-verbal cues support the message and how well do they represent the company? If the employee is "sharp," the company is "sharp." If we are "slow" and "sloppy," the company is "slow" and "sloppy." Employees non-verbally communicate a great deal about their company.

11. Assertiveness training: Individuals should have strong communication self concepts and be able to perform the skills with confidence. Part of the on-going training should emphasize the development of a positive self concept so that the individual is positively able to reach out and deal with others through communication.

12. Conflict, barriers, and negotiations: Students should understand conflict and interpersonal barriers, have a positive attitude toward their resolution and elimination, and be able to work skillfully with others to resolve conflict, eliminate barriers, and negotiate better interpersonal relations.

13. Career communication values: Students should develop positive values to guide career communication. Discussion and a project of listing the values can be used to internalize them. The students should have the values to guide continual improvement and seek to realize the accomplishment of those values.

DECODING SKILLS FOR CAREER COMMUNICATION

Generally, speech communication theory and training emphasizes speaker or encoder skills. It is audience centered. Most lecture, training, and class critique emphasizes what is right or wrong about the design and delivery of the message. Contest speaking is predominantly speaker oriented; the objective is to have individuals perform well as speakers.

A very definite commitment can be, and should be, made to deal with decoding skills. That type of training is especially necessary for individuals, in speech communication classes, who are going to need communication in the performance of their careers. I doubt that many students are left out of that population.

Rationale for Decoding Training

Consider this illustration to understand the concept of decoding training. A boss tells the secretary, "Please take care of this work quickly." The secretary gives an interpretation that quickly, a relative term, means now. A few minutes later the boss sees the secretary at work on the project and explodes, "Why aren't you working on the Anderson report?" The reply is, "I thought this project had to be done 'quickly.'" The boss replies, "Friday would be soon enough; the Anderson report must be done now!"

A typical communication breakdown has taken place. The secretary, who uses communication as a career skill, may be in trouble. Whose fault is the breakdown? With our source-orientation we would say that the boss is wrong. A boss who understands communication might agree; however, in most situations the boss will blame the secretary. "The secretary was not listening." "The secretary cannot follow instructions." Invariably the secretary loses.

Now we could argue for the need to train bosses to be better senders. I would agree that the boss should have given better instructions. Nevertheless, the secretary could have averted the breakdown which led to a reprimand. To realize that "quickly" was a relative concept and to seek clarification could have averted the breakdown. "How quickly do you want this project completed?" "Is it more important that the Anderson report which I'm working on now?" "Will tomorrow be quickly enough?" Questions such as these can be used to help refine the message by narrowing the latitude of interpretation.

Simply, the rationale for decoding training is this. If decoders can do a better job of realizing the potential for misunderstanding--miscommunication --and can seek clarity through a series of feedback statements and questions, they can do their jobs more appropriately and eliminate communication problems which can become personnel problems. The decoder, therefore, should feel a responsibility for helping to clarify a message, should place a high value on getting the message clarified, and should be assertive enough to ask questions, quickly and succinctly, to refine the interpretation of the sender's message. Such training can literally help individuals to do a better job, thereby receiving the monetary and affiliative rewards of effective work. This is the rationale for decoding training.

Decoding Problems

The list of problems and remedies provided here may not be complete, but it should be sufficient to indicate the sorts of problems which need attention. Individual instructors can add to this list. Collectively, the items in the list suggest that decoding skills are necessary when statements, questions, orders, and requests are not clear. Clarity is the generic problem. Although the specific recognition of a communication problem may demand some knowledge about the subject, before the problem can be recognized, in many cases simply being aware that kinds of breakdowns are possible should lead decoders to probe to disclose whether there is a breakdown.

Ambiguity: Ambiguity is a problem. In a conversation several people may be mentioned. Personal pronouns, "he," "she," "they," are then used to refer to specific individuals. The referents of these pronouns should be clarified. Here is an excellent instance where the decoder needs no special knowledge of the subject at hand to realize the problem of pronoun ambiguity.

Ambiguity often occurs in the giving of instructions. "Be neat." "Be prompt." "Arrive early." "Complete the project quickly." "It's in the large box." Note the ambiguity. The two communicators need to achieve a similar meaning for such terms as "neat," "prompt," "early," "quickly," "larger." In each instance more definite statements can be made. "This," pointing to some other work, "is an example of what I mean by neat." Prompt is no more than five minutes late. Quickly means by Friday; early means fifteen minutes from now. Large means 3" x 5". We mistakenly react to multi-valued terms as though they were two-valued. Also, realizing that some terms, like neat, lack specific definition, we may want to show an example thereby defining the abstraction.

Dual messages: Sometimes we send dual messages. The sender has a message, encodes, and the receiver sees two or more possible messages in one statement. The real problem occurs where several messages prevail and neither individual realizes the possibility of another message. An example of a dual message would be: "Jones is having scheduling problems." What does the statement mean? Jones can't handle the scheduling problems. Although the scheduling problems are great, Jones will prevail. Such is an example of a dual message. In the first instance Jones comes off as being incompetent; in the later, he or she is competent.

Conflicting instructions: During the course of a day a secretary may be told, in essence, to be two things at once. Or, the boss may be contradictory, forgetting a previous set of instructions. When instructions appear to be conflicting, this must be pointed out. If the error is simple miscommunication, that problem can be solved. Perhaps one set must be chosen over another set of instructions; if so, the priority can be mutually established.

Concreteness-specificity: A definite referent may be in the boss's mind when he or she says "quickly." One clerk may order 4,000 rubber gaskets without specifying size or model. Statements become concrete when the word-thing relationship is made definite. "Get a 409 form" means nothing without showing such a form as a means of establishing a referment. "We are looking for someone who is efficient and clean" may be so vaguely stated that a good employee is fired for spending too much time sorting and cleaning.

Priorities: A busy work week demands that priorities prevail. "See that Mr. Wilson is taken care of" may mean now or in his proper turn. Job descriptions, such as neat and prompt, may not state that prompt is more important than neat.

Distortion: Some messages are so poorly designed that no one could understand them. The intended meaning is distorted. "You are too friendly with other employees" may suggest a sexual relation to someone who believes that a smile helps create comfortable work environments. "Jones never misses a deadline" may be a complaint about her overly rigid concern for detail. "Our productivity is falling off" may mean, because you are so slow we will probably fire you.

Implicit criteria: In handling any work assignment, criteria for doing the job are implied. They may need to be externalized and verified to assure mutual understanding.

Incomplete instructions: Sometimes, perhaps more often than one would admit, instructions are incomplete. If someone were to follow the literal meaning of the instructions, chaos would reign. "Filing is to be done by Smith" may fail to reflect that you are supposed to tell Smith to do the filing.

Uncertain questions: People who request information or assistance may not know how to ask for help. The job may have a name, but the caller doesn't realize that several jobs which are similar fit that description; without knowing the name, description of the job may cause problems. How many times have we called for assistance only to realize that the person on the phone knows less than we do or too little to help? Unless they can recognize our confusion, they may give us the wrong assistance.

Decoding Remedies

Each problem may demand one or a variety of remedies. Remedies may be appropriate to the handling of one or more problems. Thus, the remedies will be listed and described, but not directly related to specific problems.

Questioning: Recognizing the possibility of a decoding problem, a series of questions can be used to disclose whether a communication problem exists and, if so, what the intended meaning is. The skill of the questioning is aimed at narrowing the interpretation, seeking concreteness and specification, and disclosing hidden instructions, criteria, or priorities.

Restatement: This is a direct form of feedback used to indicate to the sender what message came through. As restatement, though, it is not a verbatim statement.

Delineation: This is a process of narrowing interpretation where ambiguity or inconsistency is apparent. When alternatives of meaning are available, the decoder suggests several alternatives and lets the encoder choose that alternative which most nearly fits the intended message. This device is particularly important for a problem like dual messages.

Posing alternatives: When a person asks for information or assistance, he or she may be so vague that the request is not followed. The request may be naive of the alternatives available. This remedy is used when alternatives are available or essential. The alternatives are posed in a logical sequence, letting the sender decide on the appropriate alternatives at each level.

Asking for completion: Often the sender fails to give the necessary details for a receiver to understand fully the point being made. Too often the decoder assumes that he or she is ignorant and fails to press for the complete details. This is a remedy whereby the receiver follows the implied train of thought until all details have come out.

Ferreting criteria: Any job or any evaluation implies the necessity of criteria. Thus, whenever jobs, evaluations, or any other assignments are discussed, criteria may be implicit but not openly stated. The decoder should be sensitive to tasks requiring criteria and be able to ferret them out.

Establishing priorities: When orders are given, the encoder may have a priority for the immediate assignment in regard to the other projects in the workload. The sender and receiver may be assuming different priorities among the tasks in the workload. Discussion and questions can firmly establish the priority of each assignment.

Seeking complete instructions: Instructions may be given in such general terms that the decoder cannot follow them. Through restatement, the decoder can assertain where ambiguity exists. Through a careful, thoughtful approach to the subject the vagueness of instructions may be discovered. If so, the two parties are on their way to agree on the instructions.

Pointing: This is a means of achieving more concreteness. When a "contract" is mentioned, the decoder may ask "Is that the Smith contract?" This is a method of pointing to a referent to determine whether it is the one suggested.

Maintaining objectivity: The fundamental value supportive of decoding skills is objectivity. The problem of miscommunication is simply human error. It is not a matter of victory or moral or intellectual superiority. An attitude of objectivity goes a long way toward providing the nonevaluative, nondefensive environment in which miscommunication can be effectively resolved.

These are some of the problems and remedies which call for decoding training. Career communication is dependent upon training individuals to work together in a communication environment. We do our students a service when we prepare them to be able to maximize career communication by being skillful decoders.